

An etymology of the scientific names of Victorian snakes

David Meagher

The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010

Abstract

The original meanings of the scientific names of Victorian terrestrial and marine snakes are outlined, with supporting evidence where possible from the authors of the names. (*The Victorian Naturalist* 129(2), 2012, 54–60)

Introduction

Graecum est, non potest legi. ‘It is Greek, it cannot be read.’ (Attributed to Francis Accursius, 13th century lawyer.)

Etymologies and translations of scientific names are often included in catalogues, field guides and the like, but they are often erroneous because it is not always easy to understand the original intentions of the authors of these names, and simple translations can be misleading.

This paper sets out as much as can be established about the true etymologies of the names of all snake genera and species known from Victoria. The species listed by Museum Victoria (2011) are included, along with *Denisonia devisi* and *Acanthopsis antarctica* — the first recently reported from Victoria (Clemann *et al.* 2007) and the second reliably reported from near Lake Boga in the 19th century (Kreffit 1869). In addition, some previously familiar names are absent as a result of recent taxonomic or biogeographic decisions, particularly *Morelia spilota variegata*, *Pseudonaja nuchalis*, *Ramphotyphlos australis* and species previously assigned to *Rhinoplocephalus* and *Simoselaps*.

Where possible I have gone to the original publication to determine the author’s intention. If that has not been possible I have tried to locate the author’s explanation in a later work, or an explanation by another zoologist in a contemporaneous publication.

Most names have Greek stems, or at least Latin stems with Greek origins, so I have chosen to give the Greek stem unless it is directly from Latin or some other language. For simplicity, anglicised Greek rather than classical Greek is used here, and the aspirated *h* sound is included in the spelling of the root where necessary, as in *hydros*. For Greek stems I have relied upon Morwood and Taylor (2002),

supplemented by Bagster (1870). Marchant and Charles (1952) and Lewis (1891) were used, where necessary, for Latin stems, supplemented by Stearn (2004). The English names for species are those accepted by ABRS (2011).

Etymologies

Acanthophis Daudin, 1803 — *akantha* (thorn, spine) + *ophis* (snake), referring to the spine-like tail. ‘Dans une notice publiée il y a quelques mois sur les ophiidiens, j’ai donnée au douzième genre le nom d’*acanthure*; mais, comme ce nom est déjà employé par Lacépède pour un genre de poisson, je substitue ici le nom d’*acanthophis*, à cause d’un ergot corné à l’extrémité de la queue, ainsi que l’indique le nom formé de deux mots grecs.’¹ (Daudin 1803a: 287).

antarcticus (Shaw & Nodder, 1802) (Common Death Adder): Latin *antarcticus*, referring to the southern distribution: ‘This beautiful, and hitherto undescribed serpent, is a native of Australasia...’ (Shaw and Nodder 1802: page facing plate 535).

Austrelaps Worrell, 1963 — Latin *auster* (the south) + genus *Elaps*, alluding to the southern distribution of the new genus in comparison to the ‘true’ members of *Elaps* (Worrell 1963: 3).

ramsayi (Kreffit, 1864) (Alpine Copperhead): After the collector of the original specimen: ‘Mr. E. P. Ramsay discovered this new Snake in the neighbourhood of Braidwood, N. S. Wales...’ (Kreffit 1864: 181). Edward Pierson Ramsay (1842–1916) was a curator of the Australian Museum in Sydney from 1874 to 1894, and was a founding member of the Linnean Society of New South Wales (Chisholm 1976).

superbus (Günther, 1858) (Common Copperhead): Latin *superbus* (remarkable, splendid), presumably reflecting Günther's impression of the numerous specimens he cited, although he did not say as much (Günther 1858: 217). The vernacular name 'copperhead' was introduced by Frederick McCoy, on account of a sad episode: 'I have adopted the name "copper-head" for this snake from a well-known vendor of a supposed antidote for snake-bites, who used to go about the streets with several specimens of this species in the bosom of his shirt, protruding now and then around his neck. On the evening of the last day on which I saw this, he was induced to cause one of them to bite him, to show the value of his antidote, and was dead in a few hours. The colour of the head is like that of an old dark copper coin.' (McCoy 1877: 9).

Brachyurophis Günther, 1863 — *brachys* (short) + *uro-* (tailed) + *ophis* (snake), from the length of the tail: 'Body rounded; head short, not distinct from neck; tail short.' (Günther 1863a: 21).

australis (Krefft, 1864) (Coral Snake): Latin *auster* (the south), alluding to the geographic locality: 'I believe the present species is the first *Simotes* discovered in Australia...' (Krefft 1864: 180).

Cryptophis Worrell, (1961:26) — Presumably from *kryptos* (hidden) + *ophis* (snake), although Worrell (1961) gave no clue about the etymology.

nigrescens (Günther, 1862) (Small-eyed Snake): Latin *nigrescens* (becoming black, blackish), alluding to the colour: 'Uniform blackish olive above; ventral shields whitish, blackish on the sides; the entire head, superiorly and inferiorly, of the same colour as the back.' (Günther 1862: 131).

Demansia Günther, 1858 — According to Günther (1863b: 350), '[*Diemenia*] is the correct spelling of the word, which evidently has been derived from *Van Diemen's Land*). Originally written *Demansia* by Dr. Gray, altered into *Diemennia* by the editor of the 'Proceedings of the Zoological Society' (1863) and it has since been altered into *Demansia* by me (Colubr. Snak. p. 254). Müller (1885: 690) used the spelling *Diemenia*. The

name was coined by J.E. Gray in an unpublished manuscript (Gray MS Brit. Mus. 1836) and first published by him a few years later (Gray 1842b: 54), although without a formal description and therefore a *nomen nudum*. Günther (1858: 211) published the necessary description that validated the name.

I think that Günther was not correct in his interpretation of the name, since the species on which Gray based the name, *Demansia reticulata*, was collected by W. Buchanan and is endemic to south-west Western Australia. The name, like many coined by Gray, probably honours some patron, friend, naturalist or collector, possibly with the surname Demanse, Demanser or Demansier. There is no evidence to connect the name to Van Diemen's Land, whether in the sense of Tasmania or northern Australia.

psammophidia (Duméril, Bibron & Duméril, 1854) (Yellow-face Whipsnake): genus *Psammophis* + *idion* (diminutive ending), an allusion to the similarity between this species and that genus: 'Le même auteur a remarqué une si grande analogie de formes entre ce Serpent et celui qu'il nomme le *Psammophis Moniliger*, que, à notre grand regret, il a cru devoir lui donner ce dernier nom spécifique pour rappeler cette similitude. Mais malheureusement, il a attribué à une espèce le nom d'un genre, ce qui prête trop à la confusion. Aussi, nous a-t-il paru convenable de remplacer cette dénomination par le mot *Psammophidien* qui rappelle ce rapport.' (Duméril et al. 1854: 1238).² The name *Psammophis* is from *psamos* (sand, sandy desert) + *ophis* (snake).

Denisonia Krefft, 1869 — After William Denison (1804–1871), Governor-General of the colony of New South Wales, who in 1860 recommended Krefft for appointment as assistant curator at the Australian Museum (Rutledge & Whitley 1974). The type specimen was collected by Thomas Nobbs near Rockhampton, Queensland (Krefft 1869: 83), so the name does not refer to Port Denison, then the name for Bowen.

devisi Waite & Longman, 1920 (De Vis' Banded Snake): After Charles Walter de Vis (1829–1915), clergyman and zoologist at the Queensland Museum in Brisbane, who first described the species, as *Hoplocephalus*

ornatus de Vis, 1884. De Vis was born in England and came to Australia in 1870. (Gilbert 1972: 63). In 1882 he joined the Queensland Museum, and became its director in 1901. Waite and Longman (1920:178) transferred the snake to *Denisonia* as *D. maculata* var. *devisi*, replacing the epithet *ornatus* with *devisi* to avoid a junior homonym of *D. ornata* Krefft, 1869.

Drysdalia Worrell, 1961 — ‘After Mr. G. Russell Drysdale, Australian artist who accompanied me to Tasmanian islands where I collected the material for the present description.’ (Worrell 1961: 25). George Russell Drysdale (1912–1981) is considered one of the greatest Australian artists, particularly for his iconic *The Drover’s Wife* (1945), *Sofala* (1947), *The Cricketers* (1948) and *War Memorial* (1950).

coronoïdes (Günther, 1858) (White-lipped Snake): *korone* (wreath, crown, diadem) + *oides* (resembling), alluding to the head stripes, which resemble a head-wreath or regal diadem: ‘On each side of head a black, beneath white-edged streak; no collar.’ (Günther 1858: 215).

mastersii (Krefft, 1866) (Masters’ Snake): After entomologist George Masters (1837–1912), who collected the original specimens: ‘Hab. Flinder’s [sic] Range. Collected by Mr. George Masters, who found seven specimens.’ (Krefft 1866: 371). English-born Masters migrated to Australia in 1856 and became assistant curator and collector at the Australian Museum in 1864. He was a skilled shot, and collected venomous snakes with his bare hands (Whitley 1974).

Echiopsis Fitzinger, 1843 — genus *Echis* + *opsis* (resembling), merely an allusion to the similarity in appearance to that genus. Fitzinger (1843: 28) published the name as baldly as possible, listing only the two species he included within it and placing it in the family (Chersophes) that contained *Echis*. *Echis* is from the Greek *echis* (snake).

curta (Schlegel, 1837) (Bardick): Latin *curtus* (shortened), alluding to the stocky appearance of the head. Schlegel called the species ‘Le Naja ramassé’ (stocky Naja): ‘...ses formes ramassées, sa queue courte et grosse...La tête est en form du poire ou

de coeur, très large, ramassée...’ (Schlegel 1837: 487).³

Furina Duméril, 1853 — presumably from Latin *furina* (probably referring to the goddess Furina, an infernal deity popularly associated with the Furies, but perhaps also meaning the Devil personified, or merely a robber), alluding to the nature of the snakes, although Duméril (1853: 517) gave no hint of his meaning.

diadema (Schlegel, 1837) (Red-naped Snake): *diadema* (diadem, headband), alluding to: ‘Une tache occipitale blanchâtre, en forme de bande transversale, renfermée dans le noir profond du dessus de la tête, a donné lieu à la dénomination que porte cette nouvelle espèce.’ (Schlegel 1837: 32).⁴

Hydrophis Sonnini & Latreille, 1802 — *hydros* (water) + *ophis* (snake), a simple allusion to the marine habitat. The name was a replacement for *Hydrus*, an orthographic variant of *Hydra* Lamarck): ‘Ce genre est sous le nom d’hydre dans le tableau méthodique que nous avons mis à la tête de cette histoire des serpens. Nous étant aperçus trop tard que le cit. Lamarck avoit [sic] donné le même nom aux *hydra* de Linnée, les polypes d’eau-douce, nous croyons devoir, pour éviter la confusion, substituer le mot *hydrophis*, qui veut dire *serpent d’eau*, à celui d’hydre ou d’*hydrus* de Schneider.’ (Sonnini & Latreille, 1802: 193).⁵

ornata J.E.Gray, 1842: Latin *ornatus* (adorned, beautiful), clearly alluding to the banding and colours on the body, the description of which made up almost all of Gray’s account of the species: ‘Head and back slate-coloured, with a series of broad lozenge-shaped blackish cross-bands, under jaw, lower parts of sides and belly whitish, with a few indistinct bands on the sides: tail black, with rather broad whitish cross bands...’ (Gray 1842c: 61).

Morelia J.E.Gray, 1842 — As with *Demansia*, Gray (1842a: 43) gave no hint of the etymology of this name. However, I think it very likely honours French zoologist Pierre Marie Arthur Morelet (1809–1892), whose name was abbreviated to ‘Morel.’ in zoological works. He specialised in molluscs (as did Gray in his early career), and Gray later named a genus of molluscs

Moreletia. Like his father, the botanist Samuel Gray, John Gray was inclined to disregard the conventions of nomenclature if he thought a particular form was more harmonious.

spilota spilota (Lacépède, 1804) (Diamond Python): *spilotos* (stained, tattooed), alluding to the blotched pattern: 'plusieurs rangées longitudinales de taches' (Lacépède 1804: 209).⁶

spilota metcalfei Wells & Wellington, 1985 (Carpet Snake): After Dean Metcalfe, an amateur zoologist from Sydney (Wells and Wellington 1985: 41).

Notechis Boulenger, 1896 — *notos* (the south) + *echis* (viper), a simple allusion to the southern distribution of the type species, *N. scutatus*: 'Australia and Tasmania' (Boulenger 1896: 351).

scutatus (Peters, 1861) (Tiger Snake): Latin *scutatus* (armed with a shield), alluding to the distinctive pattern of shields that Peters emphasised in his description: 'Ein vorderes Präorbitalschild, viel höher als lang, 2 Postorbitalia. Nur 6 Supralabialschilder, das 3te und 4te stoßen ans Auge, das erste untere Temporalschild schiebt sich nach unten zwischen die letzten beiden ziemlich gleich großen Supralabialschilder ein.' (Peters 1861: 690).⁷

Oxyuranus Kinghorn, 1923 — *oxys* (sharp, needle-like) + *ouranos* (the arch of the heavens), alluding to a striking feature of the palatine (i.e. the arch of the palate): 'The palatine possesses a long, toothless, needle-like anterior process, which projects well beyond the teeth, but not to the level of the anterior extremity of the maxillary bone. Such a process is not traceable to any other elapine snake examined.' (Kinghorn 1923: 44).

microlepidotus (McCoy, 1879) (Small-scaled Snake, Fierce Snake): *mikros* (small) + *lepidotos* (scaled), referring to the relatively small scales: 'It is very easily distinguished from the Common Brown Snake (*D. superciliosa*) by the greater number of rows of scales across the back, and their obviously much smaller size and greater number, particularly across the back.' (McCoy 1879a: 13).

Parasuta Worrell, 1961 — *para* (near, similar to) + genus *Suta*, a simple allusion to the close relationship to that genus, which Worrell erected in the same paper (Worrell 1961: 26).

dwyeri (Worrell, 1956) (Dwyer's Snake): 'It is proposed to describe the Queensland snakes as a new species which I have pleasure in naming after Mr. J. Dwyer of Cairns, who was instrumental in locating Mr. Dunmall's series and obtaining working specimens.' (Worrell 1956: 202). John Dwyer, who accompanied Eric Worrell on snake-collecting trips in Queensland to collect venom for the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories (Worrell 1958), drew the illustrations for the original description of the species. The specimens were collected by W. Dunmall near Glenmorgan, Queensland. Dunmall's Snake, *Furina dunmallii* (Worrell, 1955) was named after him.

flagellum (McCoy, 1878) (Little Whip Snake): Latin *flagellum* (whip), presumably referring to the appearance of the species, although McCoy (1878) did not say as much. The arrangement and colouration of the scales is reminiscent of the braided appearance of a leather whip.

nigriceps (Günther, 1863) (Mitchell's Short-tailed Snake): Latin *nigriceps* (black-headed), alluding to the colour of the upper parts of the head and nape (Günther 1863b: 362).

spectabilis (Krefft, 1869) (Port Lincoln Snake): Latin *spectabilis* (remarkable, worth seeing). Krefft (1869: 61) did not explain the etymology, but it is clear enough.

Pelamis Daudin, 1803 — French *pélamide* (sea-snake): 'Les animaux qui sont placés dans ce genre ont... l'habitude singulière de vivre dans l'eau; aussi le connoit-on dans quelques endroits de l'Inde sous le nom de serpent d'eau, qui est aussi donné à plusieurs espèces de murènes: on doit sans doute être bien surpris de savoir que ces serpens vivent dans la mer, principalement la pélamide bicolor, ainsi que le nom générique semble l'indiquer...' (Daudin 1803b: 357).⁸

platurus (Linnaeus, 1766) (Yellow-bellied Sea Snake): *platys* (oar-blade) + *oura* (tail), alluding to the paddle-like tail: 'cauda compressa obtusa' (Linnaeus 1766: 391).

Pseudechis Wagler, 1830 — *pseudos* (false) + genus *Echis*, alluding to the separation of the type species *P. porphyriacus* from *Echis* (Wagler 1830: 171).

porphyriacus (Shaw, 1794) (Red-bellied Black Snake): *porphyra* (purple, violet), alluding to the colouration: 'Violet-black snake, with the abdomen and side crimson; the scuta margined with black.' (Shaw 1794: 28).

Pseudonaja Günther, A. 1858 — *pseudos* (false) + genus *Naja*, presumably simply from the broad similarity of the type species (*P. nuchalis*) to that genus ('typical' cobras), which Günther (1858: 209) considered to be confined to Africa and the East Indies.

aspidorhyncha McCoy, 1879 (Shield-fronted Brown Snake): *aspidos* (shield) + *rhynchos* (beak, nose), alluding to 'the enormous size of the rostral shield' (McCoy 1879b: 14).

textilis (Duméril, Bibron & Duméril, 1854) (Common Brown Snake): Latin *textilis* (woven), from the woven or plaited appearance because of the unusual colouration: 'Le distribution des couleurs de ce Serpent est tout à fait remarquable...C'est ce qui nous a fourni l'idée de désigner cette espèce sous le nom de *Furina Tricotée*.' (Duméril et al. 1854: 1245).⁹

Ramphotyphlops Fitzinger, 1843 — *ramphos* (beaked) + genus *Typhlops*, alluding to characteristic 'beak' on the nose of the type species, *R. multilineatus*, and the genus from which it was separated (Fitzinger 1843: 24). The name *Typhlops* is from *typhlos* (blind) on account of each eye being hidden by a scale, hence the common name 'blind snake'.

bicolor (Peters, 1857) (Blind Snake): Latin *bicolor* (two-coloured), from the distinctive dorsal colouration: 'Oben braun mit violettem Schein...'¹⁰ (Peters 1860: 81).

bituberculatus Peters, 1863 (Blind Snake): Latin *bis* (twice) + *tuberculatus* (warty), alluding to the protuberances on each of the internasal scales, giving the species a distinctive 'trilobed' nose: '...jederseits neben demselben bilden...einen vorspringenden Höcker...'¹¹ (Peters 1863: 233).

nigrescens J.E.Gray, 1845 (Blind Snake): Latin *nigrescens* (becoming black, blackish), from the overall colour: 'Body slender, blackish.' (Gray 1845: 135).

proximus Waite, 1893 (Blind Snake): Latin *proximus* (very near), possibly alluding to the nasal fissure 'being in contact with the first labial and produced on to the upper

surface of the snout', a feature that Waite noted was common to only three other species (Waite 1893: 60–61). Alternatively, it might allude simply to the closeness of the species to *R. nigrescens*, which Waite discussed in some detail.

Suta Worrell, 1961 — A repetition of the specific epithet of *Hoplocephalus sutus* Peters 1863, which Worrell (1961: 25) separated from *Hoplocephalus*.

suta (Peters, 1863) (Curl Snake): Latin *suta* (plates fastened together, mail), presumably from the mail-like appearance of the body caused by dark shading on the front edges of the scales, although (Peters 1863: 234) did not say as much.

Vermicella Günther, 1858 — Latin *vermis* (worm) + *ellus* (diminutive word ending), presumably alluding to the worm-like appearance of the species. The name was apparently coined by J.E. Gray in an unpublished manuscript (Günther 1858: 236).

annulata (J.E.Gray, 1841) (Bandy Bandy): Latin *annulatus* (marked with rings): 'White (in spirits) with twenty-eight black rings (twenty-five on the body and three on the tail); head with two black bands, one on the end of the nose and the other with the eyes in front of it.' (Gray, 1841: 443).

Notes

- ¹ 'In a paper published a few months ago on snakes, I gave the name *acanthure* to the twelfth genus; but as this name has been used by Lacépède for a genus of fish, I replace the name here with *acanthophis*, because of a spine at the end of the tail, as the two Greek words that form the name indicate.'
- ² 'The same author [i.e. Schlegel] noticed such a great similarity of forms between this snake and the one he calls *Psammophis moniliger* that, much to our regret, he believed he had to give it this last specific name to point out this similarity. But unfortunately, he has given to a species the name of a genus, which is too confusing. Consequently, we have taken the opportunity to replace this name with the word *psammophidien* which points out this relationship.'
- ³ 'their stocky shape, the short and fat tail... The head is in the shape of a pear or a heart, very large, stocky ...'
- ⁴ 'A whitish occipital mark, in the shape of a transverse band, within the deep black of the top of the head, is the reason for the name which this new species carries.'
- ⁵ 'This genus is under the name *hydre* in the methodical tables that we placed at the start of this history

of snakes. We realised too late that citizen Lamarck has given the same name to the *hydra* of Linné, the freshwater polyps — we believe it is appropriate, to avoid confusion, to substitute the word *hydrophis*, that is to say *water snake*, for that of *hydre* or *hydrus* [Amphibia] of Schneider.

- 6 'several longitudinal rows of blotches'
 7 'A front preorbital shield, much wider than long, 2 postorbitals. Only 6 supralabial shields, the 3rd and 4th abutting the eye, the front lower temporal shield wedged down between the rear two quite equal large supralabial shields.'
 8 'The animals that are placed in this genus have ... the singular habit of living in water; also they are known in some parts of India under the name *water-snake*, which is also applied to several species of morays: one must certainly be very surprised to know that these snakes live in the sea, principally the two-coloured sea snake, also that the generic name seems to indicate this...'
 9 'The distribution of colours of this snake is quite remarkable... It is this that gave us the idea to designate this species under the name *Woven Furina*.'
 10 'Brown above with pale violet ...'
 11 '... each side extended likewise to form a prominent hump ...'

Acknowledgement

I am very much indebted to Nick Clemann for his insightful suggestions for corrections to the original manuscript.

Literature references

- Australian Biological Resources Study (ABRS) (2011) Australian Faunal Directory (www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/abrs/online-resources/fauna/afd), viewed 1 September 2011.
- Bagster S (1870) *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*. (Samuel Bagster & Sons: London)
- Boulenger GA (1896) *Catalogue of the Snakes in the British Museum (Natural History)*, Part 3. (British Museum: London)
- Chisholm AH (1976) Ramsay, Edward Pierson (1842–1916), ornithologist and zoologist. In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Volume 6, pp. 3–4. Ed B Nairn (Melbourne University Press: Parkville, Victoria)
- Clemann N, Robertson P, Gibbons D, Heard G, Steane D, Coventry AJ and Chick R (2007) An addition to the snake fauna of Victoria: De Vis' Banded Snake *Denisonia devisi* (Serpentes: Elapidae) Waite and Longman. *The Victorian Naturalist* 124, 33–37.
- Daudin FM (1803a) *Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière des Reptiles*. Volume 5. (Dufart: Paris)
- Daudin FM (1803b) *Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière des Reptiles*. Volume 7. (Dufart: Paris)
- Duméril AMC (1853) *Prodrome général de la classification des serpents. Mémoires de l'Académie des Sciences de l'Institut de France* 23, 399–536.
- Duméril AMC, Bibron G and Duméril A (1854) *Erpétologie Générale ou Histoire Naturelle Complète des Reptiles*, Volume 7, Part 1. (Roret: Paris)
- Fitzinger LJ (1843) *Systema Reptilium*. (Braunmüller & Seidel: Vienna)
- Gilbert LA (1972) de Vis, Charles Walter (1829–1915). In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Volume 4, pp. 63–64. Ed D Pike (Melbourne University Press: Parkville, Victoria)
- Gray JE (1841) A catalogue of the species of Reptiles and Amphibia hitherto described as inhabiting Australia, with a description of some new species from Western Australia. Appendix E. In Grey, G. *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia, during the Years 1837, 38, and 39, under the Authority of Her Majesty's Government*, Volume 2, pp. 422–449. (T. & W. Boone: London)
- Gray JE (1842a) Synopsis of the species of prehensile-tailed snakes, or family Boidae. In *The Zoological Miscellany* Volume 2, pp. 41–46. Ed JE Gray. (Treuttel, Würz & Co.: London)
- Gray JE (1842b) Description of some hitherto unrecorded species of Australian reptiles and batrachians. In *The Zoological Miscellany*, Volume 2, pp. 51–57. Ed JE Gray. (Treuttel, Würz & Co.: London)
- Gray JE (1842c) Monographic synopsis of the water snakes, or the family Hydriidae. In *The Zoological Miscellany*, Volume 2, pp. 59–68. Ed JE Gray. (Treuttel, Würz & Co.: London)
- Gray JE (1845) *Catalogue of the Specimens of Lizards in the Collection of the British Museum*. (British Museum: London)
- Günther A (1858) *Catalogue of Colubrine Snakes in the Collection of the British Museum*. (British Museum: London)
- Günther A (1862) On new species of snakes in the collection of the British Museum. *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* ser. 3, 9, 52–59; 124–132.
- Günther A (1863a) On new species of snakes in the collection of the British Museum. *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* ser. 3, 11, 20–25.
- Günther A (1863b) Third account of new species of snakes in the collection of the British Museum. *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* ser. 3, 12: 348–365.
- JKinghorn JR (1923) A new genus of elapine snake from north Australia. *Records of the Australian Museum* 14, 42–45.
- Kreff G (1864) Descriptions of three new species of Australian snakes. *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* 1864, 180–182.
- Kreff G (1866) Descriptions of three species of snakes of the genus *Hoplocephalus*. *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* 1866, 370–371.
- Kreff G (1869) *The Snakes of Australia*. (NSW Government Printer: Sydney)
- Lacépède BGE (1804) Mémoire sur plusieurs animaux de la Nouvelle-Hollande dont la description n'a pas encore été publiée. *Annales du Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle*. Paris 4, 184–211.
- Lewis CT (1891) *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK)
- Linnaeus C (1766) *Systema Naturae per Regna Tria Naturae, Secundum Classes, Ordines, Genera, Species, cum Characteribus, Differentiis, Synonymis, Locis. Tomus I. Classis III. Amphibia. Reptiles, Serpentes*. pp. 347–393. Holmiae: Laurenti Salvii.
- Marchant JRV and Charles JF (1952) *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*. (Cassell: London)
- McCoy F (1877) *Hoplocephalus superbus* (Günth.). The Copper-head Snake. *Prodromus of the Zoology of Victoria* 1, 7–9.
- McCoy F (1878) The little whip snake. *Prodromus of the Zoology of Victoria* 2, 7–9.
- McCoy F (1879a) Small-scaled brown snake. *Prodromus of the Zoology of Victoria* 3, 12–13.
- McCoy F (1879b) The shield-fronted brown snake. *Prodromus of the Zoology of Victoria* 3, 13–14.
- Morwood J and Taylor J (2002) *The Pocket Oxford Classical Greek Dictionary*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK)
- Müller F (1885) Vierter Nachtrag zum Katalog der herpetologischen Sammlung des Basler Museums. *Verhandlungen der Naturforschenden Gesellschaft in Basel* 7, 668–717.
- Museum Victoria (2011) Australian snakes — The Victorian fauna (www.museumvictoria.com.au/bioinformatics/snake), viewed 30 July 2011.

- Peters W (1860) Eine neue zu der Gattung *Onychocephalus* gehörige Wurmsschlange, *Onychocephalus macrurus*, und verglich sie mit den bisher von dieser Gattung bekannt gewordenen Arten. *Monatsberichte der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 1860, 77–83.
- Peters W (1861) ('1862') Eine zweite übersicht (Vergl. Monatsbericht with 1859 p. 269) der von Hrn. F. Jagor auf Malacca, Java, Borneo und den Philippinen gesammelten und dem Kgl. zoologischen Museum und übersandten Schlangen. *Monatsberichte der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 1861, 683–691.
- Peters W (1863) ('1864') Übersicht der von Hrn. Richard Schomburgk an das zoologische Museum eingesandten Amphibien, aus Buchsfelde bei Adelaide in Südastralien. *Monatsberichte der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 1863, 228–236.
- Rutledge M & Whitley GP (1974) Krefit, Johann Ludwig Gerard (Louis) (1830–1881), In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Volume 5, pp. 42–44. Ed D Pike (Melbourne University Press: Parkville, Victoria)
- Schlegel H (1837) *Essai sur la Physiologie des Serpens. Partie Générale et Partie Descriptive*. Volume 2. Kips & Stockum, La Haye.
- Shaw G (1794) *The Zoology of New Holland*. (London)
- Shaw G & Nodder FP (1802) The Antarctic Boa. *Naturalist's Miscellany* 13, plate 535 and text.
- Sonnini CS and Latreille PA (1802) *Histoire Naturelle des Reptiles*, Volume 4, Part 2. Serpens. (Deterville: Paris)
- Stearn WT (2004) *Botanical Latin*. 4th edition. Timber Press: Portland, Oregon.
- Wagler JG (1830) *Natürliches System der Amphibien, mit Vorangehender Classification der Säugethiere und Vögel*. (J.G. Cotta: München, Stuttgart und Tübingen)
- Waite ER (1893) Notes on Australian Typhlopidae. *Records of the Australian Museum* 2, 57–62.
- Waite ER & Longman HA (1920). Description of little-known Australian snakes. *Records of the South Australian Museum* 1, 173–180.
- Wells RW & Wellington CR (1985) A classification of the Amphibia and Reptilia of Australia. *Australian Journal of Herpetology, Supplementary Series* 1, 1–61.
- Whitley GP (1974) Masters, George (1837–1912). In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Volume 5, pp. 223–224. Ed D Pike (Melbourne University Press: Parkville, Victoria)
- Worrell E (1956) A new snake from Queensland. *Australian Zoologist* 12, 202–205.
- Worrell E (1958) *Song of the Snake*. (Angus & Robertson: Sydney)
- Worrell E (1961) Herpetological name changes. *Western Australian Naturalist* 8: 18–27.
- Worrell E (1963) A new elapine generic name (with skull diagrams of type species recently separated from the Australian genus *Denisonia*). *Australian Reptile Park Records* 1, 1–7.

Received 18 August 2011; accepted 2 February 2012

One Hundred and Twenty-four Years Ago

SNAKES

To the Editor of the Victorian Naturalist.

DEAR SIR,—The fact of Victorian snakes biting each other having been disputed, I thought it might interest some of your readers to relate a little incident which came under the notice of two friends and myself whilst in the vicinity of Fern-tree Gully. We were scouring the district, and on the look-out for whatever might turn up of interest in the natural history line, when, suddenly, my elderly friend, who wore spectacles, exclaimed, in a half-startled manner—“Look there! What on earth is that?” I turned sharply round, and at once saw two fine copper-headed snakes (*Hoplocephalus superbus*). These two, which proved to be male and female, were so close together that it was difficult to determine at the first glance whether there was in reality more than one specimen, but in this we were speedily assured, as the female reared her head and sniowed fight. We had a gun, and my friend was on the point of firing at them when I begged their lives to be temporarily spared, as I was desirous of preserving the pair in spirits. I had a stick, but one quite unsuitable for the purpose of a “snake-stick,” and with this I struck the two sharply across the back, without breaking the vertebrae. This somewhat rude and abrupt attack upon the snakes had the effect of arousing their indignation; but instead of attacking me, the author of their misfortune, the female made a dart at and bit the male very severely about six or eight inches below the back of the neck. The male, by this time, was getting remarkably lively, and, I suppose by way of reciprocity, he (the male) was so ungallant as to make a most savage attack upon his lady-love and bite her in a very determined manner. It is a pity that we had not time to stay and note the effect which these bites would have had upon these animals, some arguing that the poison is harmless if injected into the same class of reptilia, whilst others contend that it is, in all cases, a deadly poison. I have taken some considerable interest in snakes, and have killed hundreds, but this was the first occasion on which I had had an opportunity of witnessing what I myself had long doubted, viz., that our snakes do really bite each other; and it would be interesting to have the experience of other members of the Club and others whether there are authenticated instances of snakes killing each other by poison. The two specimens will be at the next meeting of the Club: I may remark that there is not the slightest difference in the length of the two specimens, each being four feet three inches.—Yours truly, CHARLES FRENCH

From *The Victorian Naturalist* V, p. 32, June 1888